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ABSTRACT

The critique circle is a pedagogical technique for involving students in the process of oral evaluative criticism of performance work. After the performance of scenes, students gather in a circle. Any student may begin the critique and responses proceed around the circle in a clockwise fashion, with the rules requiring each student to evaluate or pass. Rather than functioning as the omniscient evaluator who controls and leads the discussion, the instructor evaluates the critical comments of each student based on such criteria as the ability to recognize crucial skills and whether these skills are being used effectively or ineffectively, the use of appropriate terminology, effectiveness as listener and speaker, and so on. Among its advantages as a pedagogical method, the critique circle helps students to take critical responsibility seriously, to gain abilities in recognizing important performance skills, to increase listening skills and confidence, to participate more equally in discussion, and to receive immediate feedback. (JL)

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THE CRITIQUE CIRCLE: A TECHNIQUE FOR TEACHING ORAL PERFORMANCE CRITICISM

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THE CRITIQUE CIRCLE: A TECHNIQUE FOR TEACHING ORAL PERFORMANCE CRITICISM

During post-performance evaluation sessions an acting or directing teacher hears a variety of student comments. Some are primarily vague re-active reportage:

The scene was really interesting. Randy and Rick captured my attention and held it. It was exciting to watch.

Other comments illustrate no evidence of the evaluator's recognition of crucial performance skills:

The final moment in the scene when Sheri was in the chair and Mike was standing above her was tense. I was really nervous.

Often comments discern no detailed differences between effective or ineffective performance: "Mark and Sue were really playing well together; I believed them." And finally many do not explore the "why" or "how" behind the obvious:

Bill's characterization was weak. His hands kept flying around and his foot kept tapping. This was disturbing.

The following comments are closer to a teacher's ideal:

The scene held my attention because Randy and Rick maintained such high levels of performance energy. Even the quiet moments had a focused energy on achieving character objectives. Their solid eye contact at moments of climax helped to hold my attention.

Bill's physicalization really worked against the character's personality. The character is strong and defiant during this unit. Bill's choice of keeping his hands moving all the time and of tapping his foot constantly worked against the character's strength. And, all that movement distracted my attention from the lines, the thoughts.

I believed Mark and Sue because they listened and reacted to each other so well. This all helped to create the illusion of the first time.

The tension of that final moment was incredible. Mike's dominance and power were emphasized by his standing behind

the chair; Sheri in the chair was weak and vulnerable. The fact that Sheri didn't know he was there created both tension and menace. I was really nervous.

These comments illustrate the students' knowledge of performance skills, of the vocabulary of the art, and of critical perception. Theatre educators care about developing such oral evaluative skills. The critique circle may help us to achieve this objective.

The critique circle is a pedagogical technique for involving students in the process of oral evaluative criticism of performance work. By encouraging students to use the critical concepts of the discipline within a comfortable yet moderately controlled environment, the technique stimulates both the critical faculty and critical facility. As a supplemental teaching device, the critique circle emphasizes process and provides both immediate and long-term rewards for the students. Additionally, it eliminates the influence of the instructor's opinion; students formulate critical responses independently.

Acting and directing instructors use different techniques for teaching performance criticism. Informal instruction occurs every time the teacher evaluates a performance in class; students learn by example from the instructor model. Formal instruction may be structured in student comment sessions led by the teacher or through individual written evaluations provided by the teacher.

These usual methods may produce inconsistent results. The instructor model, although potentially the most ideal in providing the most specific techniques, is inadvertently overlooked by students who are concentrating on the content of the instructor's message and not on the form. Most students' overpowering goal in performance classes is to improve their performing abilities. By focusing on content in instructor criticism students

achieve this primary goal, but reduce their awarenesses of the form. Often oral performance criticism receives insufficient rewards; grades in performance classes may be entirely based on growth in performance, not in critical skills.

Formal techniques, can also fail to teach oral critical skills. Comment sessions after performances are dominated by the instructor either consciously or unconsciously. Students, wise to the fact that the instructor's remarks are the only ones that "count," will defer to the comments of the teacher. Some confident students willingly participate. However, they usually possess sufficient skills in oral evaluation. The non-participants never gain oral evaluation practice. Also, many students deprecate the remarks of their peers: "What do they know? All I care about is what Professor X thinks!" Having listened to a lot of banal babbling from students about scenes, these deprecators have a point. Besides why listen to criticism from your peers when it does not matter in the structure of the class? Finally, formal written evaluation fails in the same way as the informal instructor model approach: the student concentrates on content rather than form.

How can the goal of teaching performance evaluation be achieved in the acting or directing class? Obviously it is not the major goal in the class for either the instructor or student. Growth in specific performance skills in acting or directing as defined by the instructor will always be the prime goal. Yet, evaluation is the key to growth. If students can recognize positive and negative performance skills in others and verbalize their understanding using performance terminology, their own perceptions of the crafts of acting or directing will expand. These enlarged perceptions may cause growth in their own performances. Not only will a valuable skill be developed, but also the students' own performance abilities may be

enhanced. The critique circle is a technique which achieves the minor objective of teaching oral evaluation without deemphasizing the major objective of teaching performance skills.

The methodology of the critique circle is simple. Students, after the performance of scenes, gather themselves into a circle. The circle arrangement facilitates direct eye contact and promotes students' awareness of each other. Any student may begin the critique. After the first comment, the responses proceed around the circle in a clock-wise fashion. The rules of the critique circle require the student to evaluate or pass. Students who have passed may rejoin the evaluation on their next turn. They are encouraged to listen and to consider other students' perceptions as the critique progresses. They are encouraged to use notes to stimulate detailed criticism. Performers do not comment on the evaluation of their own scenes during the operation of the circle; a short time is reserved after the evaluation for performer reaction. The evaluation ends after all students pass, after all contributions have been made.

The instructor's role in the critique circle is to evaluate the quality and quantity of a student's criticism of the performance. Therefore, rather than functioning as the omniscient evaluator who controls and leads the discussion, the instructor evaluates the critical comments of each student. The criteria for evaluation may be based on a variety of factors:

- 1) Does the student show ability to recognize crucial skills in the performance?
- 2) Does the student discern the effective or ineffective use of these skills?
- 3) Does the student exhibit evaluation abilities using terminology appropriate to the performance discipline?
- 4) Is the student an effective listener?
- 5) Is the student's confidence in expressing ideas orally improving?
- 6) Does the student show knowledge of an appropriate set of general assumptions about performance on which to base comments?

- 7) Is there an awareness of the seriousness of performance criticism?
- 8) Is the quantity of student evaluation reflective of serious thinking about performance criticism?

The evaluation by the teacher should be noted in writing at the time of the student's comment. A four point scale provides our method of ranking responses: four = excellent, three = good, etc. This ranking allows for easy tabulation of both the quantity and quality of the comments after the session. The instructor may participate in the critique to ask a question, to clarify a comment, to re-focus the discussion, or to insert a term, e.g., "illusion of the first time," which defines precise terminology for a student. These intrusions should be minimal, but are usual during the first times this technique is used in class.

The critique circle has distinct advantages as a pedagogical method:

- 1) Students take critical responsibility seriously. Since the rules of the critique circle demand participation, students are more focused in their evaluation; the critical "spotlight" shines on them each time their turns occur. No escape, no avoidance, no blending-into-the-woodwork is possible. Also, the serious aspect of evaluation is intensified by the instructor's evaluation of the student criticism.
- 2) Students gain abilities in recognizing important performance skills, evaluating the efficacy of those skills, and expressing their evaluation using the vocabulary of the art. Although students may have accomplished these behaviors informally, the critique circle formalizes the practice and thereby reinforces important instructional concepts.
- 3) Listening skills are promoted. Effective listening is demonstrated by noting the amount and accuracy of the feedback directed to specific comments made by other students. Repetition of previous comments points to ineffective listening.
- 4) The students' confidence in their abilities to evaluate performance grows. With each use of the critique circle students, who seriously are involving themselves in the process, will demonstrate greater security and surety in their manner of presenting their comments. This growth is discernable to both the instructor and the students.
- 5) Rewards for improving performance criticism are received immediately through student awareness of peer feedback. And, since the instructor is factoring an evaluation for performance criticism

into the final course grade, students will receive a long-range reward for continued growth. Instructors may give additional feedback to students about their growth in criticism if they wish.

- 6) The critique circle promotes equal opportunity to participate in the evaluation session; the more highly skilled student does not dominate the session. Yet, the precocious student has the opportunity to shine, since the rules allow comments to continue as long as someone has something to say.
- 7) Since students seated in the circle are acutely aware of their peers who are being evaluated, a constructive honest, sensitive, humane criticism is developed. The tendency to evaluate destructively, to "put-down," to ridicule are controlled through the quality of the critical environment created by the students' awareness of each other.

Educators should be aware of certain conditions when using the critique circle. The technique works best with classes of fifteen students or less. If used with larger classes it becomes unwieldy and its advantages are diminished. The critique circle is recommended only as a supplement to instructor written and/or oral evaluation. The method allows for instructor comment either orally after each session, orally in individual conferences, or in writing to each student. Instructors may decide which forms of evaluation complement their pedagogy. However, a summary at the end of a class period would be useful, especially to reinforce good points made during the critique circle and to dispel inaccurate or incorrect notions presented by students. This summary allows modest instructor evaluation during the class session and fulfills our obligation in the instruction of criticism for the class as a whole. Detailed instructor evaluation is best accomplished during individual conferences or in written criticism. Finally, the critique circle is a growth process in teaching criticism. Instructors should expect to witness a development in students' abilities to speak their critical minds. Often too high expectations too early in the use of the technique will lead to instructor disappointment.

The critique circle is an effective method in teaching performance evaluation. Used in relation with other written and oral approaches, the critique circle offers a strong supplement to a methodology of teaching performance criticism.